

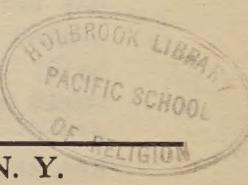
to promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which are in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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The Ways of the Creator in the Natural World

By Clyde N. Rogers

It is said that it takes more credulity to believe that the universe is a thing of chance than to believe that it was created in an orderly, purposeful manner. No matter how far back in time it may have been we accept the premise, "In the beginning God created." (Genesis 1:1)

There are at least three important characteristics of the Creator found in the first chapter of Genesis.

1. The Creator was a person.

2. There was a purpose in His creation. "And God blessed them, saying, Be fruitful, and multiply." (Genesis 1:22)

3. Man was the culmination of that purpose. "So God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him." (Genesis 1:27) Man was created in the spiritual image of God. The whole meaning of Scripture is that God created man for fellowship with Himself. In the words of St. John, "To them gave He power to become the sons of God." (John 1:12)

At one time many scientists were non-religious, and some were even anti-religious. Today it would be difficult to find a top-ranking scientist who does not believe in a purposeful Creator, and that creation is a continuous process. In this they are in harmony with the thinking of the modern man in the field of religion. Henry Drummond, a forerunner in this attitude, observed in 1888, "No single fact of science has ever discredited a fact of religion."¹

¹ Drummond, Henry, NATURAL LAW IN THE SPIRITUAL WORLD, New York, 1888, p. 31
(James Pott & Co., Publishers)

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It was a new day for religion when man began to realize that God did not bring the world into existence, then leave it to operate by chance. Jesus stated it well when he said, "My Father worketh hitherto and I work." (John 5:17) Jesus indicated many times that the creative process is at work in the world of nature. "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth fruit." Death, life and regeneration are inevitably bound together. Each has a relationship to the other and all of them to God.

T. T. Lynch, the poet, expressed the attitude of Jesus toward the natural world in these significant lines:

He spoke of grass and wind and rain,
And fig trees and fair weather;
He made it his delight to bring
Heaven and earth together.

He spoke of lillies, corn, and vines,
The sparrow and the raven:
And words so natural yet so wise
Were on men's hearts engraven:

And yeast and bread, and flax and cloth,
And eggs and fish and candles -
See how the whole familiar world
He most divinely handles.²

Jesus saw God's hand at work in the natural world. He used the ordinary occurrences to give spiritual meaning to all of life.

In the world of nature there is the problem of good and evil, with which man has always been confronted. Wherever we look we see good fruits and bad. We see productive life and parasites. Early in Old Testament Scripture we find, "I set before you a blessing and a curse." (Deuteronomy 11:26) Man's concept of the relationship of God and man has varied with the depth and breadth of his understanding.

There are those who believe that there cannot be good without its parallel of evil. There are others who think that evil is simply the absence of good. There is much evidence to indicate that evil in its dynamic forms exists, as surely as good is to be found with life and vitality. In the natural world there are things which are poisons for one purpose, but are preservatives for another. It is truthfully said that alcohol will preserve anything that is dead, but in sufficient amount it will kill anything that is alive. This is but one of the countless examples which could be given. The use to which things are placed makes the difference.

In order to understand God, we need to see and feel the creative process at work. The more we are in tune with the creative process, the more we are able to feel God working with us. Paul said, "We are co-laborers with God." We should joyously accept the privilege of this relationship.

² A Compilation, The Abingdon Bible Commentary. New York, The Abingdon Press, 1929, p. 916.

So far as we can discover, the creative process works in a regular cycle, the time of which, generally speaking, cannot be shortened. It still takes nine months, from the time of conception, for a child to be born. It also requires 800 to 1000 years for Nature to create one inch of life-giving soil. It is quite possible that man and God working together can modify some of these processes. Nature adjusts itself to meet the requirements of a shorter season. Flowers will mature more quickly in Alaska than in the temperate zone. Although quirks are to be found in nature, the seasons, as a rule, are dependable. The writer of Ecclesiastes stated it well when he said, "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven.... a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted." (Ecclesiastes 3:1,2)

Again and again Nature reminds us that the kind of fruit harvested is dependent upon the type of seed sown. "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that will he also reap." (Galatians 6:7) This is not a man-made law, but one of the basic laws of the universe which Paul had observed. The writer of James said, "Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? Either a vine, figs? So can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh." (James 3:12) If a man by his labor produces good fruits the results will be a good harvest. "The fruit of the spirit," says Paul, "is love, joy, peace, long suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance; against such there is no law." (Galatians 5:22-23) The only man who has real freedom is the one who lives in harmony with God's laws. "By their fruits, ye shall know them."

According to Dr. H. A. Morgan, Head of the Tennessee Valley Authority, ninety-five percent of the elements of nature are inexhaustible, or returnable. He thinks that God felt that He could not trust man with more than five percent. Man's wastage of even the five percent often condemns him to a poor life. In essence, God does not judge man. Man brings judgment upon himself in his failure to be a faithful steward of the resources entrusted to him. Dr. Morgan further points out that man only discovers and uses what God creates. This was the philosophy of Dr. Morgan in regard to the work of the Tennessee Valley Authority. In a section where the beautiful hills had been denuded by cutting off the forests and wasting the soil through plowing up and down the hillsides, he advocated a change in order to conserve the earth.

There have been two definite philosophies in regard to land. The older of the two was engraved on the national school building in Mexico. "The earth is to be exploited by man." This had been the general American attitude until the Commission on Country Life was appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt on August 10, 1908. When this Commission gave its report the following year there was the beginning of a changed attitude. No deep impact was made, however, until the dust storms of the middle thirties shocked us into action. From far and near there has been raised the cry, "The earth is the Lord's, and man is His steward." We are only beginning to discover the truths which the Psalmist had announced long ago.

In regard to atomic energy Dr. Morgan suggests that "In the fullness of time" man discovered this source of power. He feels that God allowed man to discover atomic energy to take the place of other sources of energy which are rapidly being depleted. Even in the use of atomic energy there is the element of choice of good and evil. Man can destroy himself, or he can produce

a better life than he has ever known.

The care with which the Creator deals with nature indicates His joy in the work of His hands. "And God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good." (Genesis 1:31) "The glory of the Lord shall endure forever: the Lord shall rejoice in His works." (Psalms 104:31) God does not create for Himself alone. He creates that man may have the joys of His creation with Him. This is a part of the pattern of Fatherhood, Sonship, and Brotherhood. "He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and herbs for the service of man: that he may bring forth food out of the earth." (Psalms 104:14)

In cooperation with God, man can produce food not only for himself, but also to share with others. Lowell suggested some values of sharing, in his immortal words:

The Holy Supper is kept, indeed,
In whatso we share with another's need;
Not what we give, but what we share -
For the gift without the giver is bare;
Who gives himself with his alms feeds three
Himself, his hungering neighbor, and me.³

The writer of Job points to the Creator by asking who causes "it to rain on the earth where no man is; on the wilderness where there is no man?" (Job 38:26) This could suggest to us that God out of His goodness gives a surplus. Or, perhaps more logical, should man ever go to these uninhabited places, the blessings of God would be there for him.

One of our great needs is to see our relationship to the created resources of God. There is the story of a farmer to whom it was said, "You and God have made a fine farm here." The farmer, in a light vein, replied, "You should have seen it when God had it alone." The farmer failed to see that God had furnished the rain, the sunshine, and the life-giving elements in the soil. He even took for granted the element of life found in the seeds and the processes of reproduction.

Even though man cannot create, he can have the joy of sharing in the creative process of God. It is his opportunity and responsibility to improve animals, seeds, and soils. Recent experiments with hybrid alfalfa indicate that within the next five years the current yield may be doubled. We need only to visit a 4-H Club exhibit of livestock to see what can be done in cooperation with the Creator. The apples of Johnny Appleseed's day were a far cry from the choice varieties of the present. At the same time, thoughtful people will not soon forget the story of this strange man who, by working with God, helped to make possible the fruits of our day.

God always starts with people. Man begins as a child. His first desires are for physical comfort. As he becomes a social being he recognizes the needs and desires of others. The American pioneer community usually built around the church as the center of community life. In a simple society when an individual accepted Christ, because of the cohesiveness of the family, it was natural for the entire family to do likewise. A modern example of Patriarchial families becoming Christian is to be found in the Fiji Islands. Seventy

³ Lowell, James Russell, "The Vision of Sir Launfal," Part 2nd, Chap. VIII.

years ago nearly all of the Islanders were cannibals. Today more than ninety percent are Christians.

Aaron H. Rapking has declared, "Our forefathers did a good job of redeeming the individual, and a fair job of redeeming the family, but we must find a pattern for redeeming the community." The community is a vital entity in our society. Every area of community life must be redeemed if we are to have a Christian civilization. This can most effectively be done in rural areas. Democracy cannot live without a strong community consciousness. On the whole, the church is no longer the center of community life. Nor will it be in a complex society unless we use the God-given pattern of community redemption which is the establishment of the Kingdom of God in the countryside.

The Creator has a love for beauty. "He has made everything beautiful in His time." (Ecclesiastes 3:11) When man tries successfully to imitate the beauty of God's natural world, he does his best work. One of the highest compliments a person can pay to beautiful landscaping is to say, "That looks natural." God, who made man with a nature which is sensitive to a love for beauty, could surely be expected to feel and see beauty far more keenly.

In our cold, scientific age, we need to grow in a love and appreciation for beauty. God has endowed us with these possibilities if we will only develop them. Man truly becomes a new creature when he sees, understands and expresses the beauty of nature.

Dr. John Paterson of Drew University suggests that the Bible is a book of gardens. In the second chapter of Genesis we find the Garden of Paradise Lost. At the close of Revelation we find that Garden of Paradise Regained. Between the two is the Garden of Sacrifice. It is impossible for man to get from the first to the last without going through the Garden of Sacrifice. Not only is sacrifice necessary, but man must surrender himself to the will and purpose of God. This is the place where too many fail.

Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, "I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase." (I Corinthians 3:6) This statement suggests that it takes the efforts of more than one to accomplish the purposes of God. Each must recognize the contribution of the others, but growth is the gift of God.

Atop the dome of the capitol building in Lincoln, Nebraska, there is a great statue of a man sowing seed. The legendary figure broadcasts his seed much as men did in the time of Jesus. It is especially impressive at night with great floodlights upon it. Visitors passing through Lincoln have learned to love this statue and as they travel back and forth across the country they begin to watch for it while still several miles from the city. At last they see the sower. There he stands through sunshine and rain, day and night, winter, spring, summer and fall, sowing the seed. He reminds one of the parable of Jesus:

And he said, So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed into the ground; And should sleep, and rise night and day, and the seed should spring and grow up, he knoweth not how. For the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself; first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear. But when the fruit is brought forth, immediately he putteth in the sickle, because the harvest is come. (Mark 4:26-29)

Those who work in harmony with each other and thus in harmony with the universe will find God cooperating with them; but those who work against each other work against the purposes of God and thereby bring chaotic conditions.

The greatest story of sacrificial love that the world has known was clothed in a rural garb when Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd: the Good Shepherd giveth his life for the sheep." (John 10:11) This is the heart of the Christian faith.

Life is a gift of God. Man has not yet discovered its secret and perhaps he never will. A technician can make a grain of corn in his laboratory so like a real grain that no one could tell the difference but he cannot put into it the germ of life to make it grow. Life comes from life. The Psalmist, recognizing these gifts said, "O Lord, how manifold are Thy works: in wisdom Thou hast made them all: the earth is full of Thy riches." (Psalms 104:24)

God not only gives life but sets the limits and pronounces the judgments upon it. One very important part is man's attitude toward God and his use of the life which God has given him. In the Parable of the Talents, Jesus declared that if a man does not develop and use the talents which God has given him they will be taken away.

Henry Drummond said, "Life depends upon contact with life."⁴ He further suggested that the spiritual birth is no more difficult to explain than life in the physical realm. The sages, the saints, the philosophers and the poets have all attempted to explain life but even in his sublimest moments man can go no farther than to pay this tribute - life is a gift of God.

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Drummond, Henry, NATURAL LAW IN THE SPIRITUAL WORLD, p. 74.